

A PHILOSOPHY OF THE
CHRISTIAN RELIGION
FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST
CENTURY

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Faith in late modern reasoning

1 Introduction

In Chapter 1, we dashed through 25 centuries of development, from the Homeric age (ninth or eighth century BC) to the beginnings of modernity (c.1600). In Chapter 2, we covered developments up to the end of the nineteenth century, with some scant attention to the twentieth. In this chapter, we consider developments in philosophy, including philosophy of religion, from the 1920s to the present.

I ended Chapter 2 by noting two of the chapter's deficits. First, it considers "faith" primarily in terms of theology—what I have called second-order discourse—but not the beliefs of the ordinary believer. Second, I noted that two relatively distinct communities of scholars have developed—philosophical theologians and philosophers of religion—and that I had not given adequate attention to the latter. Because current philosophers of religion tend to focus on first-order beliefs and language, giving attention to their work in this chapter will thereby remedy the first of the previous chapter's deficits as well as the second.

Section 2 will describe three principal positions in recent philosophy of religion. The debates among their proponents are interesting, but they may be interminable: there is something right about each, but the criticisms of each also have merit. This will also be an appropriate place to consider critiques of what I have been calling "inside-out" philosophy. In section 3, I return to the topic of epistemology and trace the accumulation of problems facing foundationalist theories of knowledge. I then describe (in section 4) their replacements, beginning around 1950. This change in the philosophical world is good news for theology and for religious belief more generally, because it is the inadequacy of the modern epistemological theories, not of Christianity itself, that made justification of belief so difficult for 300 years, as I show by noting briefly some of the uses of holist epistemology in theology. I end this chapter with an account of the new challenge that holist epistemology has created for religious belief (and theology): a new and more virulent form of religious relativism.

Chapter 4, the final chapter in Part I of this text, describes the most ambitious and, I argue, most adequate account of rationality, that of Alasdair MacIntyre. I intend to show how his account both addresses the problem of relativism and also incorporates the best of the three prominent recent positions in philosophy of religion, while explaining the weaknesses of each. Then I consider what MacIntyre's work entails for the various types of arguments for God's existence

(a topic to which much more space is usually given in philosophy of religion texts) and explain why they fail to be convincing in our current intellectual world. I end with an alternative, MacIntyrean, account of what it would now look like to make a case for the rationality of Christian belief.

2 The shape of current philosophy of religion

Of all the topics that have been investigated by philosophers of religion, the one that has received the most attention in the modern period is what I am loosely calling faith and reason. Evaluation of arguments for the existence of God forms a large part of many texts, and this is a subtopic within that of faith and reason.

I mentioned in the Overview to this Part that one faith-and-reason issue is the question of whether religious belief *needs* to be rational or not, and if so, what would count as showing its rationality. This is where some of the most recent work in the philosophy of religion is focused. I consider three positions, called evidentialism, Reformed epistemology, and "Wittgensteinian fideism."¹

2.1 Evidentialism

Evidentialism is the thesis that belief in God does indeed need to be supported by adequate evidence.

In Chapter 2 (section 4.3), I noted the change in meaning of "probable knowledge" in the early modern period, from belief approved by authorities to belief supported by the preponderance of evidence. I noted that this latter sense of the term was not available to René Descartes, but soon afterwards it came to influence discussions of the rationality of Christian belief. John Locke was concerned about the proliferation of radical religious sects in his day and argued that it is a misuse of our God-given faculties, and therefore a sin, to believe anything without sufficient evidence. So evidentialism has been common throughout most of modern thought. Over the years, the proportion of thinkers who have judged some form of religious belief to be adequately supported has gradually diminished, while the number arguing explicitly that it does not has increased. David Hume's arguments, published both before and after his death in 1776, have been highly influential. He argued that in addition to positive evidence, such as goodness and order in nature, one needed to give equal attention to the negative, such as the evil and disorder.

W. K. Clifford (1845–79) is credited with invention of the term "evidentialism" in "The Ethics of Belief" (1879), where he claimed that there is an intellectual

¹ Two books are particularly helpful overviews of debates: Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, eds., *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1955); and Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

and moral duty not to believe in God without a sufficient argument. More recent religious skeptics are Antony Flew (1923–2010), J. L. Mackie (1917–81), and Kai Nielsen (b.1926). Flew is best known for his claim that in the face of counter-evidence, such as disorder in the world, theists regularly qualify their claims to the extent that they no longer have cognitive content. Mackie is noted for arguing that the “logical problem of evil” provides a definitive refutation of monotheistic religions (see Chapter 7 below). That is, he claims that the obvious existence of evil in the world cannot be logically reconciled with the proposition that the world is the work of an omnipotent and all-good God.

Nielsen is significant for arguing that anthropomorphic concepts of God are superstitious and plainly false, while non-anthropomorphic concepts are incoherent—they really amount to a form of atheism. He is particularly important in the current dialogue for coining the term “Wittgensteinian fideism.”² We consider the appropriateness of this term in section 2.3.

Among evidentialists on the positive side, the most famous in earlier history was William Paley (1743–1805), who wrote a very widely read argument for God’s existence based on the apparent design of the natural world, particularly of the fit between organisms and their environments. More recent figures are Basil Mitchell (1917–2011), who claimed that while no single argument for God’s existence is sufficient, together they make an adequate “cumulative case” for theism. Using technical probability theory, Richard Swinburne (b.1934) argues that the various individual theistic arguments each make God’s existence more probable, but none makes it more probable than not. However, he writes, if we add the evidence of religious experience, this does tip the balance of probability in favor of theism.

2.2 Reformed epistemology

While the school of Reformed epistemology has numerous participants, I shall focus here on the work of Alvin Plantinga (b.1932), not only because he is the most significant of its proponents, but also because his position is too complex to describe briefly, as I have done with several of the evidentialists. Plantinga realizes (correctly, I argue) that “classical foundationalism,” if taken as the only account of justification, makes the provision of adequate theistic arguments impossible. Classical foundationalism admits as foundations only premises that are incorrigibly derived from sensations or are self-evidently true; examples are what are now called sense data, such as “I seem to be seeing a tree,” and “ $2 + 1 = 3$,” respectively. If these are the only sorts of “properly basic beliefs,” then it is not surprising that no argument for theism can be built upon them, but this stringent requirement also

² Kai Nielsen, “Wittgensteinian Fideism,” *Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy*, 42, no. 161 (July 1967): 191–209.

rules out arguments for knowledge of the past, for the existence of other minds, and even, as Hume showed, knowledge that an external world exists at all.

Plantinga first makes a case for the irrationality of classical foundationalism. These foundationalists have no argument or criterion for selection of their categories of basic beliefs, and therefore no proper *foundationalist* justification for their theory. He then goes on to make a positive case for Christian belief. He points out that Christians (other than philosophers) never in fact argue (or even often assert) that God exists. It is not a hypothesis, but a given in the Christian life. So what is there to prevent Christians from counting God’s existence as among their properly basic beliefs? His criterion for a justified belief is one that is formed by a person’s epistemic faculties when they are functioning properly in the circumstances for which they were divinely designed. If God exists, it is reasonable to assume that God would design people so that they would come to hold the (justified) belief in God’s existence. (Note the apparent circularity here: God’s existence and likely design explain how we have the capacity to know of God’s existence.) This move represents an inheritance from Reformed theology—in particular John Calvin’s teaching on the *sensus divinitatis*, an implanted knowledge of God not dependent on human teaching.

However, if God has designed us with the capacity to know him, how is it possible to explain the fact that there are so many unbelievers? Calvin (1509–64) taught that while the human intellect is darkened by sin, the fact that humans are created in God’s image implies that the unrepentant still must have some remnant of knowledge of God. Not all recipients cherish this knowledge, but rather cover it over by idolatry or willful self-deception. Here there is a connection with Locke’s and Clifford’s association of irrationality with moral lapse or sin (an association that goes all the way back to Augustine). Plantinga says that a system of beliefs (a “noetic structure”) is rational if it is the product of the individual having done “the right thing with respect to one’s believings. It is to violate no epistemic duties.”³ Notice how this account shifts the focus from whether a *belief* is justified to whether *the person who holds it* is justified; that is, within his or her epistemic rights to believe it.

Note also that while Plantinga has given a powerful rebuttal to what he calls classical foundationalism, he still thinks within the general foundationalist model—he argues that belief in God is a “properly basic” belief for Christians, and then uses it as a premise to reach other conclusions. A curious feature of his position, though, is that although belief in God is properly basic, “it is not groundless”⁴ because there are circumstances for an individual, such as when one calls on God for help in a time of danger, that presuppose that God can hear and help

³ Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in Plantinga and Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality*, 16–93 (52).

⁴ Plantinga, “Reason and Belief,” 74.

in such situations, and this presupposition entails that God exists.⁵ I believe that a post-foundationalist, “holist” theory of knowledge (see section 4) would better allow Plantinga to make his points while removing what appear to be inconsistencies or circularities in his account of Christian knowledge claims.

2.3 “Wittgensteinian fideism”

I place the heading of this subsection in quotation marks because it is the name given to a position held by some philosophers of religion who base their accounts of faith and reason on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s work, but who vehemently deny that they are fideists. Again, I describe here only the most prominent example, D. Z. Phillips (1934–2006).

Phillips is called (pejoratively) a fideist, that is, one who denies that a system of religious beliefs can be tested by any criterion external to itself, including that of rational assessment.⁶ There are two aspects of Phillips’s work that lead to this charge. The first is that, following Wittgenstein, he has entirely rejected modern foundationalism, particularly the variant that sets philosophy up as a universal arbiter of the rationality of other disciplines. Phillips’s rejection of foundationalism in general leads him to deny that religious beliefs should be subject to the same demands for factual support as empirical theories. Thus, a foundationalist such as Nielsen takes Phillips to be saying that there are *no* standards for correct religious statements.

Two further sources of miscommunication between Phillips and his critics come from Wittgenstein’s theory of language. I mentioned ever so briefly (Chapter 2, section 5.3) that conservative and liberal Protestants in the USA are divided over the nature of religious language. The conservatives hold to the common modern theory that language gets its meaning from the objects and states of affairs that it describes; the liberals developed a theory whereby religious language is not descriptive of religious objects but rather *expressive* of human religious awareness. One of Wittgenstein’s major contributions was to show that neither referentialism nor expressivism (or even the two theories together) could do justice to the complexity of language. To understand language, it is not helpful to attempt to produce *any* theory about it; rather, one has to observe the multifarious ways in which it is bound up with actions in the social world.

Wittgenstein invented the concept of *language games*, with associated *forms of life*—typical patterns of social interactions, such as making purchases in a store, playing guessing games, giving instructions at building sites. In all of these cases, there is the possibility of getting something wrong, but the *game itself* needs no

⁵ Plantinga, “Reason and Belief,” 80.

⁶ Anthony C. Thiselton, “Fideism,” in *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 102.

justification other than its being something we agree to do. A religion is a large collection of language games and forms of life.

Wittgenstein made a cryptic remark, “Theology as grammar,”⁷ which has prompted later writers to compare the teaching of theology to the sorts of corrections we offer beginners—for example: “No, we don’t say the Trinity is three Gods in one; we say that there are three persons in one God.” So again, criticisms and corrections of various sorts are at home in religious forms of life, but Phillips argues that there is no place to stand outside of religion to call into question an entire religious way of life and thought.

A common mistake in interpreting Wittgenstein’s view of religion is to take religion as a whole as an instance of a form of life with its own particular language game. Then it is imagined that religious language is somehow sealed off from all other spheres of life, and so not only immune from the rational assessments appropriate to other spheres, but even *unintelligible* to those who do not participate in it. So, for instance, Edward Wierenga (b.1947) says that Wittgenstein held “that the religious believer’s use of language is so different from that of the non-believer that the non-believer is unable to contradict the believer.”⁸ The brief remark by Wittgenstein that comes closest to supporting Wierenga’s claim is the following: “If an atheist says: ‘There won’t be a Judgment Day, and another says there will,’ do they mean the same?—Not clear what criterion of meaning the same is.”⁹

Phillips has written much more on this topic; he writes: “In the course of his discussions on the notion of belief as it appears in religious contexts, Wittgenstein . . . wanted to deny that the non-believer contradicted the believer when he said, ‘I do not believe in God . . .’ One of his reasons for this conclusion was that he did not think that ‘There is a God’ and ‘There is no God’ are contradictory statements within the same mode of discourse.”¹⁰ Certainly, Phillips says, much meaning is lost when Christian language is torn away from its scriptural contexts. And there are varieties of unbelief ranging from that of a person who knows nothing of the context to one who knows the context quite well, yet refuses to participate in a Scripture-formed life. Wittgenstein’s point in the whole of the lecture that gave rise to this discussion¹¹

⁷ Philosophical theologians who have made use of this remark include Paul L. Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978); and Dallas M. High, *Language, Persons, and Belief: Studies in Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations and Religious Uses of Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967). See also historical theologian George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

⁸ Edward R. Wierenga, “Philosophy of Religion,” in John V. Canfield, ed., *Philosophy of Meaning, Knowledge and Value in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 429–46 (434).

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 58.

¹⁰ D. Z. Phillips, *Religion without Explanation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), 183.

¹¹ Wittgenstein, *Lectures*, 53–72.

is that belief and action are so closely interwoven that, apart from knowing how the (purported) belief in God or the Last Judgment affects the speaker's life, we cannot judge what, if anything, it could mean to him or her.

I suspect that most readers will find this account of Phillips's work unsatisfying. His ideas cannot be summed up in a neat thesis about faith and reason; in this sense, he is being true to his mentor, Wittgenstein, who believed that the job of philosophy is not to present theories about, say, the essence of language, but rather to attempt patiently to clear up confusions as they arise. Nonetheless, I hope that the Wittgensteinian point of view will become clearer by the end of this chapter. Also, at the end, we should be in a position to explain both the strengths and weaknesses of all the positions surveyed above.

2.4 Excursus: Escaping the Cartesian theater

It is appropriate at this point to note the escape from the modern image of the Cartesian philosopher trapped in his or her own mind, since it was one of the philosophical confusions that Wittgenstein was at pains to cure. As I have noted, in a variety of contexts, Descartes's peculiar image of his true self as being located inside his mind or soul has had disastrous consequences for the whole of modern thought. His inside-out approach led not to the certitude he desired but to even more radical forms of skepticism than had gone before. Hume did the best job of laying out the skeptical consequences of beginning the quest for knowledge with the representations inside one's mind, and at the same time Thomas Reid pointed out that the problems were the result of the misleading way in which philosophers were speaking of perception: interposing a (perceptible) idea between the perceiver and the (now questionable) perceptibility of the object. Arguments over these issues have continued right up to the present.

However, students these days often fail to appreciate the problem. They have to be coached to believe that they are seeing reddish, roundish "sense data" (the twentieth-century version of ideas) rather than a tomato. It has not been long, though, since the inside-out metaphor spontaneously affected (infected?) even children. Philosopher Bryan Magee (b.1930) describes the moment in his youth when this image struck him. He was in chapel when he reflected on the fact that upon closing his eyes all of the other boys disappeared—that is, his visual image of them did. "Up to that moment," he says,

I had always taken it for granted that I was in immediate contact with the people and things outside of me . . . but now, suddenly, I realized that their existence was one thing and my awareness of it something radically other . . . even now after all these years, what I cannot put into words is how indescribably appalling I found that moment of insight . . . as if I were for ever cut off

from everything that existed—apart from myself—and as if I were trapped for life inside my own head.¹²

In the Introduction to this volume, I contrasted three approaches to philosophy. One takes philosophy to deal with perennial problems. Two more recent approaches to philosophy include the Wittgensteinian and the Popperian. Popper's view (and the one most often illustrated in this text) is that philosophical problems are rooted in urgent questions arising outside of philosophy. We shall see many examples of such problems in following chapters. Wittgenstein took philosophical problems to be largely the result of confusions coming from misuse of language or misleading mental pictures and metaphors. The task of philosophy is to dissolve such problems, not to solve them, by showing how our language has "gone on holiday."

Clearly, the problem recalled in this section is best met with a Wittgensteinian approach, and, in fact, much of Wittgenstein's (later) philosophical work was "therapy" directed at victims like Magee. Wittgenstein and others have been largely successful in dissolving the problem within Anglo-American epistemology. However, philosophical theologians Fergus Kerr (b.1931) and Nicholas Lash (b.1934) find that the inside-out imagery is still quite influential in theology. This may be because of the way liberal theologians developed inside-out theological methodologies. Lash and Kerr help to exorcise the Cartesian self by means of parody. For Lash it is the "anxious little person" trapped in its own head; for Kerr it is "the hermit in the head."¹³

I find that simply making a picture of the mental image helps to free us from its power (Figure 8 overleaf).

A strange fact about recent philosophy is that the "linguistic turn," described at the end of Chapter 2, should have eliminated the skeptical worries arising from the "idea-idea." Recall Gottlob Frege's complaint that the concept of an *idea* had never been clear. If ideas are supposed to represent things or states of affairs, and language represents the ideas, why not eliminate the slippery middle term of the relation? Ideas would become the province of psychology, and philosophy should take the relation between language and world as its central business. This is what has in fact happened in Anglo-American philosophy. What is strange is that worries about a mind- or idea-independent world were transmogrified into worries about a language-independent reality. Richard Rorty (1931–2007) explains as follows: Modern epistemology came into being when Descartes and his followers thought of the mind as a *mirror* of reality. When language replaced ideas as the

¹² Bryan Magee, *Confessions of a Philosopher: A Personal Journey through Western Philosophy from Plato to Popper* (New York: Random House, 1998), 9–10.

¹³ Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1986); and Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, [1976] 1997).

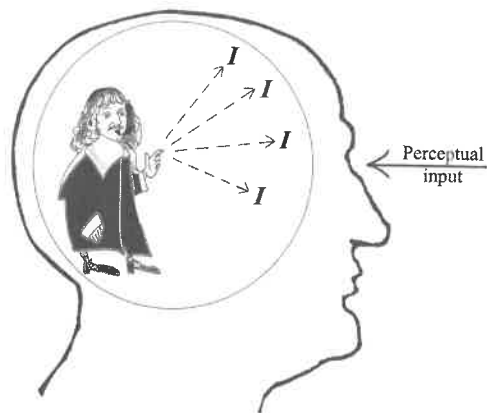


Figure 8 A representation of Descartes's head, the space inside representing his mind. Inside the mind is a miniature figure of (the real) Descartes, examining the ideas he finds there (*I* represents an idea)

main focus of philosophy, the metaphor of a mirror remained, and so the question became one of how language could *mirror* reality.¹⁴

Kevin Vanhoozer (b.1957) well illustrates veil-of-language skepticism, yet attributes it to Kant, who was writing long before the linguistic turn. Vanhoozer writes:

The Kantian picture contributes to the epistemological predicament, for he demonstrated that there is a constructive dimension to human knowing. The mind does not simply mirror reality, but rather works reality over . . . Kant could not imagine forms of logic or physics other than those of Aristotle and Newton, yet we now have to contend with alternative forms of logic, geometry, and physics. What Kant took to be universal categories of the understanding have instead turned out to be contingent and historically conditioned. The mind is not a *mirror* but a filter of nature. For post-Kantians, then, the predicament is that we construct the world with historically variable and culturally conditioned conceptual schemes . . .

The Kantian problematic amounts to the fundamental dilemma whether anything . . . is really there . . . or is everything constructed . . .? The difficulty—the Kantian problematic—is that there is no way to get behind or above our language and our conceptual schemes to check whether they fit with reality.¹⁵

¹⁴ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), see in particular p. 211.

¹⁵ "The State of Claims to Truth," in J. Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, eds., *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (New York: Orbis, 1999), 21.

The problem with this worry is, as Rorty noted, the mirror image and a picture of the knower looking at the world, but now the world is draped or veiled by language. Clearly this is one of the beguiling pictures that Wittgenstein would help us to escape by showing us how language and world are inextricably related. Neither language nor the world is conceivable for humans apart from or prior to the other.

It is true that we cannot know what the world is like apart from our human, linguistically shaped, experience of it, but to want such nonhuman knowledge is to want to be like God and we should lean against this craving. Note that to recognize that human knowledge is not divine knowledge is not to say that it is no knowledge at all.

3 Foundationalism in the twentieth century

Following this excursus, we return to the role of foundationalism in religious knowledge.¹⁶ Plantinga has already made a large part of the argument that I want to make in this section. First, there is his clever use of foundationalism itself to defeat foundationalism: there is no foundationalist argument to support the foundationalist theory of knowledge. As I would put it, the position is self-referentially incoherent. Second, he has noted that classical foundationalism, which recognizes only certain or incorrigible (irrefutable) beliefs as properly foundational (or basic), never enables one to argue to any interesting claims—or even uninteresting ones, for that matter, such as "I ate breakfast yesterday"!

In this section, I recount the history of the rejection of foundationalism, but I shall follow the progression in philosophy of science because it has been clearer and more decisive in this discipline than in others. A parallel story could be presented of the rejection of foundationalism in biblical studies, theology, and other disciplines. Along the way, I shall note some of these parallels.

A second reason for beginning with philosophy of science is that it is very difficult to keep in mind that criticism of a philosophical *theory* of knowledge is not the same as denial of the truth or justification of beliefs that the theory has been used to justify. So, until a newer and better theory of knowledge is brought to bear on Christian belief and theology, the worry easily arises that the beliefs themselves are being called into question. Any such confusion will distract from the philosophical points I wish to make here.

3.1 Logical Positivism

An organized, communal approach to philosophy of science began in the 1920s, largely in Vienna, but also in Berlin and then England. The members of the Vienna

¹⁶ These two topics are not unrelated, as Rorty's *Mirror of Nature* amply shows, but the connections need not be pursued here.

and Berlin Circles came from a variety of disciplines, but they shared a common goal of investigating the *foundations* of science. Some members, such as Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970), were what Plantinga calls classical foundationalists. That is, only contemporary reports of simple sensory experiences had the requisite certitude (in corrigibility) to serve as a foundation for empirical knowledge. Carnap's hope was that by means of definitions, statements about ordinary material objects could be constructed from collections of reports of sensual properties at space-time points. However, he soon abandoned this project as hopeless, and accepted the more workable position that sentences describing ordinary, intersubjectively recognizable, states of affairs are sufficiently solid for the foundations of science. So the insistence on absolute certitude for scientific foundations may be one of the shortest-lived philosophical theses in history!

Due to the Nazi takeover of Europe, members of the Logical Positivist school spread widely, to Britain, the USA, and Australia. Along with the allied school of "logical atomism," in England, this was a significant source of what is conventionally called Anglo-American philosophy.

Meanwhile, throughout the modern period there was an attempt to get clear on what it means, in Plantinga's terms, for a statement to be self-evidently true. Plantinga has already noted part of the problem. While " $1 + 2 = 3$ " is self-evidently true for everyone reading this text, for some " $21 \times 21 = 441$ " may not be. Thus, while Plantinga speaks in terms of beliefs being properly basic "for me" or for someone else, he is implicitly acknowledging that this sort of individualism is problematic in epistemology—a point to which I shall return (at the end of section 3.3).

To trace the many attempts to pin down self-evidently true propositions would take us too far afield—through the foundations of mathematics, Immanuel Kant's "synthetic *a priori*" knowledge, and finally to a discussion of tautologies and the criteria for synonymy (that is, how to know when two words mean the same). In the end, only tautologies such as "All green things are green" are uncontested as self-evident. But tautologies tell us nothing about the world, since all we know from our example is that *if* there exist any green things then they are green.

So again the quest for foundational statements immune from doubt has led to types of statements that are useless for supporting any interesting conclusions. I have written that the foundationalist faces a corollary of Murphy's Law ("Anything that can go wrong, will"); namely, whenever one finds suitably indubitable beliefs to serve as a foundation, they will always turn out to be useless for justifying any interesting claims; beliefs that are useful for justifying other claims will always turn out *not* to be indubitable, and in fact will be found to be dependent upon the structure they are intended to justify.¹⁷ (We take up this last point in section 4.)

¹⁷ See Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 90.

In short, classical, or "radical," or "strong" foundationalism fails entirely as a theory of knowledge.

A parallel with theology is in order here. Strong foundationalism can easily lead Christians to promote an inerrantist doctrine of Scripture. That is, if the possibility of the Bible's containing any error at all is accepted, then a passage that one wants to use to support a theological claim just might happen to be one of the erroneous ones. Doubt creeps in, and for the strong foundationalist, there is no longer any foundation at all.

3.2 Construction problems

In early modern philosophy, two kinds of reasoning were recognized. One is what Descartes called demonstrative reasoning. What he was aiming for was what is now called deductive reasoning, which guarantees that the conclusions that are correctly drawn from true premises will also be true. Again, the history is too complex to follow here. Suffice it to say that since Descartes's day, philosophers and logicians have gotten much more precise about deduction, largely by inventing new forms of symbolic logic. However, as precision has increased, the scope of the applicability of deductive reasoning has shrunk. In particular, it guarantees the transmission of truth only within a formal system, but it loses this character when applied to the real world. A simple example: it is an axiom of Euclidean geometry that parallel lines never meet. But if we take this to mean that two "parallel" phone lines will never meet, we are implicitly adding the (false) assumption that phone lines never sag.

Much of the power of Hume's skeptical arguments came from his recognition that there could never be adequate justification for inductive reasoning—the second mainstay of early modern epistemology. Strictly speaking, induction is drawing universal conclusions from limited sets of instances. The term is also used more broadly to refer to any inferences in which the claim that is made goes beyond what can be deduced from the premises. Examples are arguments on the basis of analogy, predictions of the future, inference to causes, and so forth. Hume's skeptical conclusions exploited the weaknesses of such arguments. For example, to argue from the fact that the sun has always risen in the past to the conclusion that it will rise tomorrow requires the addition of a general premise regarding the uniformity of nature. But what could justify the claim that nature always operates uniformly except an inductive argument from the fact that it has always operated uniformly in the past?

It is common now to dismiss "the problem of induction" as based on a misguided demand that induction provide the same certitude as deduction. Nonetheless, the debates about the legitimacy of induction are important because they alert us to the fact that even indubitable foundations will not ordinarily lead to indubitable conclusions because of the fallibility of the arguments upon which they depend.

At best, in ordinary life, in science, and in theology we have well confirmed conclusions, but never proof.

3.3 The Neopositivist movement

The Logical Positivists had the great intellectual virtues of recognizing their failures and of being willing to move on. Consequently, shortly after the exodus from Germany and Austria, the Logical Positivists evolved into what is now called the Neopositivist movement, which lasted from approximately 1936 through the 1970s. Carl Hempel (1905–97) and Karl Popper were two of the most significant figures.

The standard (foundationalist) model of science for the Neopositivists was called the layer-cake model. The bottom layer was composed of facts, data, observations. This foundation was not thought to be of concrete (to push the metaphor); however, a solid layer of cake is usually sufficient to hold up the rest. The next layer comprised laws or generalizations—the results of induction from collections of particular facts; for example, all gases expand when heated. The top layer comprised the scientific theories that *explained* the regularities described by the laws—for example, the kinetic theory of heat (heat is equivalent to the mean velocity of the movement of gas particles).

Construction from one layer to the next was the main problem for the Neopositivists. I have already mentioned the problem of induction, and much was written about when and why some inductive arguments were legitimate. But no sort of induction could justify the leap from the laws to the explanatory theories. Hempel and Popper both offered important solutions.

Hempel coined the term “hypothetico-deductive reasoning” to name one of the most important forms of reasoning used in science. It is also used (more loosely) in everyday explanations, in biblical interpretation, and theology. In Chapter 4, we see that it is useful for interpreting theistic arguments based on design. Hempel acknowledged that there is no such thing as a logic of discovery; theories in science come from the creative imagination of scientists. What matters is the “logic of confirmation”; that is, the goal is to show that, if the hypothesized theory is true, then we would expect to find the observations and data that we have. For example, if the kinetic theory is true, then increased heat causes faster movements of gas particles, which then collide more often with the walls of the container, and this is measured as increased pressure. Next, further implications are drawn from the hypothesis, ideally by deductive reasoning. If these further consequences are borne out by experience or observation then the theory is confirmed, and if not it is disconfirmed or falsified. Note that the theory is never said to be *proved*, since another, better hypothesis may come along in the future and displace it. So our layer cake now needs to be thought of more as a wedding cake with upper layers supported by dowel rods (Figure 9).

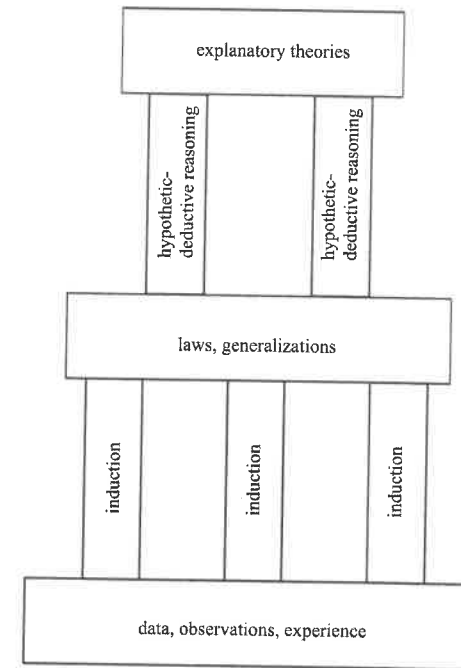


Figure 9 The Neopositivist wedding-cake model of science, with data supporting general laws (by means of induction), and laws supporting theories that explain them (e.g., by hypothetico-deductive reasoning)

Popper is known for his “falsificationism.” That is, adding one more confirming instance to a law or theory makes little difference to its justification, but one negative instance can falsify a purportedly universal law or theory. Popper was enormously influential in philosophy of science, and the next generation of philosophers usually took him as their main target. However, for our purposes, he is most interesting because he is clearly hunting for a way beyond foundationalism. Here is a vivid quotation:

the empirical basis of objective science has thus nothing ‘absolute’ about it. Science does not rest upon solid bedrock. The bold structure of its theories rises, as it were, above a swamp. It is like a building erected on piles. The piles are driven down from above into the swamp, but not down to any natural or ‘given’ base; and if we stop driving the piles deeper it is not because we have reached firm ground. We simply stop when we are satisfied that the piles are firm enough to carry the structure, at least for the time being.¹⁸

¹⁸ Karl Raimund Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1959); quotation from reprint by Harper and Row, 1965, p. 111; tr. Popper from *Logic der Forschung* (Vienna, 1935).

In addition to Popper's obvious discomfort with the foundationalist imagery, note the communal "we" that he employs. By Popper's day, it was widely recognized that science is a communal task—the relevant community of scientists has to judge when the factual support is strong enough. This represents a significant difference in interest from Plantinga's question of when an individual is within her or his epistemic rights to hold a belief. The focus here is on the theories, and whether *they* are well enough justified for the world to accept them. Yet another step away from typical modern accounts of knowledge (and toward the "holism" to come after) was his recognition that a whole system of theories is called into question by a potential falsifier, and the scientific community must judge where a change should be made.

4 The development of post-foundationalist epistemologies

We have seen (in section 2.3 above) that Wittgenstein, already in the 1930s, denied the need for foundations for forms of life, but I date the end of foundationalism to 1951, when W. V. O. Quine (1908–2000) gave his famous lecture, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." Thus, this section begins with his contributions to "holist" epistemology. Two additional subsections pick out from the works of philosophers of science Thomas Kuhn and Imre Lakatos some important ingredients that will go into the crafting of the theory of knowledge (by Alasdair MacIntyre) that I claim is sophisticated enough to address the question of the rationality of Christian belief.

4.1 W. V. O. Quine's new metaphor

It should be clear from the history I have traced so far that images, models, and metaphors are potent influences in the development of philosophical theories, for example the building metaphor that has shaped modern epistemology. Perhaps, then, Quine's new metaphor for a system of knowledge will turn out to be one of his greatest contributions. Quine rejected Descartes's presumption that a whole system of beliefs could be called into doubt all at once; Quine recognized that doubt is only reasonable when it is based on parts of a system that are not called into question.

Quine's image of knowledge is that of a web or net (Figure 10), with each belief justified if it is tied (by some form of reasoning) to beliefs that we have no reason to question. The net is constrained by (but not tied to) a boundary consisting of the deliverances of the physical senses, thus making Quine a (crude?) empiricist. However, he rejected both of the criteria I listed as identifying foundationalist epistemology. There is no special *class* of beliefs directly tied to experience—beliefs vary continuously in their distance from experience. And even if there were

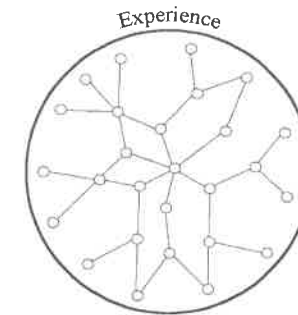


Figure 10 A Quinean web of beliefs. Note that tiny circles representing beliefs nearest the exterior of the web are not connected to any specific part of the experiential boundary

a set of special experientially certified beliefs, reasoning would not always proceed from that set to the others, because the theoretical knowledge near the interior of the web often determines which putative experiential facts will be taken seriously.

When problems occur within the system, either (1) "recalcitrant experiences"—something like Popper's potential falsifiers—or (2) logical inconsistencies, there will usually be a variety of ways to repair the network, and the choices are usually made on the pragmatic basis of wanting to disturb our shared belief system as little as possible.¹⁹ Quine's new picture of knowledge is salutary for religion scholars. No longer is there a need to find an unquestionable starting point, a theological foundation, before one can begin the task of theology proper. And of course this eliminates the need to choose between scriptural and experiential foundations. So Quine's model removes 300 years' worth of epistemological headaches. However, it still does not provide adequate guidance for theology: what use are theologians to make of Scripture and religious experience? And what of history?

4.2 Thomas Kuhn's revolutions

Quine emphasized the tendency to seek solutions to epistemological problems that disturb our system of belief as little as possible. Thomas Kuhn's interest was in the (relatively rare) cases of radical change. He introduced "paradigm" as a technical term in philosophy of science and recounted the history of science as a series of revolutions in which one paradigm replaces its predecessor. Kuhn was a historian of science, not a philosopher, and his work was intended to counter textbook accounts of science in terms of cumulative growth. In Chapter 2, we have already

¹⁹ W. V. O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," *Philosophical Review* 40 (1951): 202–43; and Quine and J. S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief* (New York: Random House, 1970).

seen something of one paradigm change, that from Aristotelian and Ptolemaic science to atomistic and Copernican systems.

Paradigms incorporate the data, laws, and theories recognized by the Neopositivists. But an interesting addition, and one that is crucial for a deeper understanding of the failure of foundationalism, is his (and others') recognition of *theories of instrumentation*. These are part of the *network* of theories (note the holism) that explain why the classes of data used in the paradigm are legitimate. For example, telescopic observations were crucial to the Copernican revolution, but a theory of optics needed to be incorporated into the new paradigm to explain why images seen through these new tubular devices should be taken to be superior to those seen by the naked eye.

In addition, a new paradigm usually involves a shift in metaphysical conceptions of the very nature of reality. Think of the shift from Aristotelian hylomorphic concepts of the material world to modern atomism. It should be of interest to theologians that scientific paradigms have their own authoritative texts, such as Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, and the task for scientific practitioners is to apply the formative text to outstanding problems. Note also the critical role Kuhn gives to the tie between language and practice: paradigmatic experiments (like those done by students in physics labs) tie the theoretical language to ways of interacting with the world and thereby flesh out the meaning of the theories.²⁰

Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is said to be the most widely read text in philosophy of science of the last 30 years of the twentieth century, but he was inundated with criticisms. Many, perhaps most, of these addressed what readers took to be relativistic implications of his work. For one thing, he noted that ideals of good science varied (somewhat) from one paradigm to another—there is no single account of scientific rationality. He likened the scientist's change from one paradigm to another to religious conversion, claiming that the change “transform[s] the scientific imagination in ways that we shall ultimately need to describe as a transformation of the world within which scientific work was done.”²¹ This sounds reminiscent of Paul's assertion (as translated by John Howard Yoder), that “If one is in Christ, behold a whole new world!” (2 Cor. 5.17).²²

4.3 Imre Lakatos and scientific rationality

Imre Lakatos (1922–74) was primarily a philosopher of mathematics, but he presented an account of change in science that built on Popper's falsificationism,

²⁰ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. ([1962] Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

²¹ Kuhn, *Structure*, 6.

²² John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 189, n. 43; his justification for this translation is on pp. 226–7.

especially on its holist elements, and provided a counterpoint to what he saw as Kuhn's irrationalism.²³

In place of Kuhn's successive paradigms, he developed an account of the history of science in terms of competing research programs. His goal was to argue that despite Kuhn's having shown that there are no theory-independent data, and that standards for good scientific research are paradigm-dependent, it was still possible to judge which is the most rational to pursue. His central insight is that research programs can be compared on the basis of *how they change over time* in response to problematic empirical discoveries.

Lakatos described a research program (Figure 11) as follows: There is a network of theoretical assertions supported by a body of data. One theory, the “hard core,”

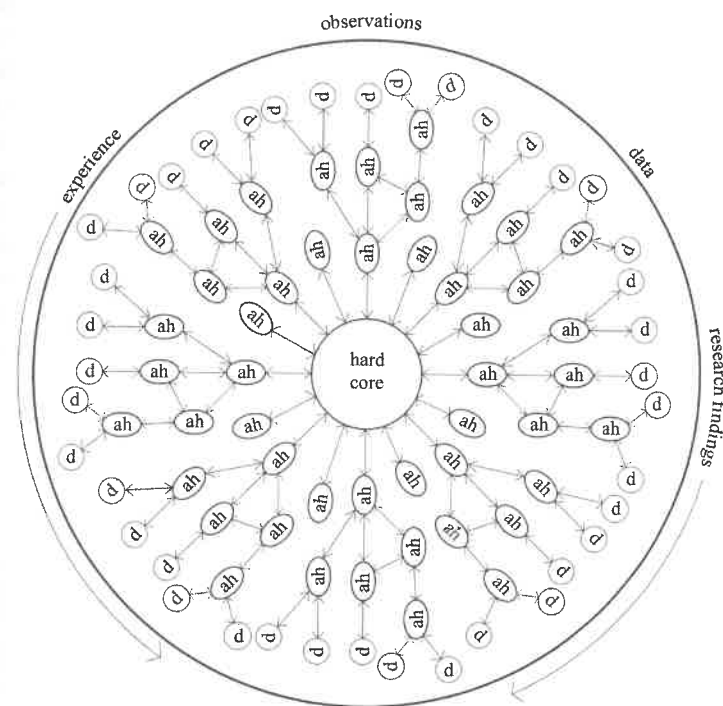


Figure 11 A (simplified) temporal cross-section of a Lakatosian scientific research program showing the hard core, a web of auxiliary hypotheses (*ah*), and data (*d*)

²³ Imre Lakatos, “Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes,” in Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 91–196; reprinted in Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1*, ed. John Worrall and Gregory Currie (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1978), 8–101.

is central to the research program. Conjoined to the core are a set of “auxiliary hypotheses” that together add enough information to allow the data to be related to the core theory. Examples of types of auxiliary hypotheses are the theories of instrumentation that Kuhn recognized, lower-level theories that apply the core theory in different kinds of cases, and so forth. The auxiliary hypotheses form a “protective belt” around the hard core, since they can be modified when potentially falsifying data are found. A research program, then, is a temporally extended network of theories whose core remains the same while auxiliary hypotheses are successively added, modified, or replaced, in order to account for problematic observations.

The problem in evaluating research programs is that, given enough ingenuity on the part of scientists, any conflicting datum (anomaly) can be made consistent with the program by adding theoretical explanations. To illustrate his point without getting into technicalities from the history of science, Lakatos tells a parable of “planetary misbehavior.” A physicist uses Newton’s laws to calculate what ought to be the path of a newly discovered planet, but the planet deviates from the predictions. Instead of taking Newton’s laws to be refuted, he adds a new auxiliary hypothesis: there is another planet, too small to be observed, whose gravitational pull disturbs our new planet’s orbit. So a larger telescope is built, but there is no additional planet found. Maybe a cloud of gas is hiding it . . . And so the story goes on. Lakatos’s point is that if one of these new hypotheses is confirmed, then there has been significant progress in astronomy—the research program is “progressive” (Figure 12). But if no such confirmation ever takes place, the program is merely creating face-saving devices—it is degenerating—and ought to be rejected if there is a more progressive one available.

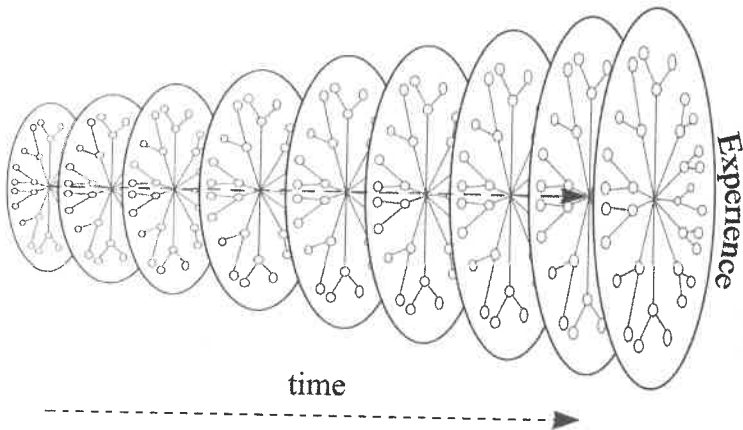


Figure 12 A (simplified) temporally extended Lakatosian scientific research program. The increasing diameter of the circles is intended to represent progress; that is, increasing empirical content

An autobiographical note may be in order here. I studied philosophy of science at the University of California, Berkeley, but then went to the Graduate Theological Union to study theology. I had not been particularly interested in Lakatos’s work at Berkeley, but I studied it avidly and wrote a dissertation on it at the Graduate Theological Union because I could see that theologians and biblical scholars are tempted to use the same *ad hoc* or “face-saving” style of reasoning as are scientists in order to defend their positions against potentially falsifying data. Here the theories are Christian doctrines and the data could be from Scripture, history, or religious experience. I argued that theological schools could be described in ways parallel to scientific research programs.²⁴ The parallels with scientific theories of instrumentation in theology are theories of revelation and interpretation that justify and guide the use of textual data, and a theory of discernment that guides communities in recognizing which putative religious experiences are actually telling us something about God and God’s will.

The important point to be gained from Lakatos’s account of scientific rationality is that justification of a paradigm, scientific research program (or theological program?) must be narrative in form. It must evaluate how the program has changed over time in the face of intellectual difficulties. However, philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend raised a problem for Lakatos’s account. Lakatos claimed to have given us a way to show, sometimes, that one program is rationally superior to its rival, but Feyerabend pointed out that there are examples in the history of science in which one program degenerated for a long period of time, but suddenly a new idea came along and it became strikingly progressive. Unless Lakatos could tell us how much time to give a program before rejecting it, he had not in fact offered the scientist any guidance. Lakatos never provided a satisfactory response.

4.4 Foundationalism’s failure

I began section 4 by endorsing Plantinga’s critique of classical or strong foundationalism. It has not been possible, over these past 300 years, to find a category of belief that is (1) not in need of justification on the basis of other beliefs, (2) indubitable, and (3) useful for supporting even minimal additional knowledge claims.

“Soft” foundationalists have had to recognize that their foundational beliefs could be called into question, and also that reasoning from the foundation to further knowledge claims never amounts to proof. If these were the only problems with the foundationalist theory, and especially if we had no other available theories of knowledge, it would be reasonable to accept this chastened form of foundationalism. However, as I have illustrated from developments in philosophy of science, there is an insurmountable problem for foundationalists. Science cannot simply

²⁴ See Nancey Murphy, *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1990).

begin with facts because recognition of relevant facts depends on prior theoretical knowledge. Theories of instrumentation are needed to tell us what observations are reliable. In fact, extremely complex networks of theory go into the design of scientific instruments and the interpretation of their readings. So it is said that the facts themselves are “theory laden.” This means the end of foundationalism in that there is no clear differentiation between two types of knowledge—factual and theoretical—and reasoning in science is a dialectical process back and forth between theory and observation or measurement. If we were forced to maintain the building metaphor, we would have to say that the superstructure holds up the foundation as much as the foundation supports the superstructure (Figure 13). Fortunately, we can simply abandon the foundationalist imagery in favor of holist images.

4.5 Theological uses of holist epistemology

I have already indicated that something like Hempel’s hypothetico-deductive reasoning is common in theological disciplines, but the parallels with science are

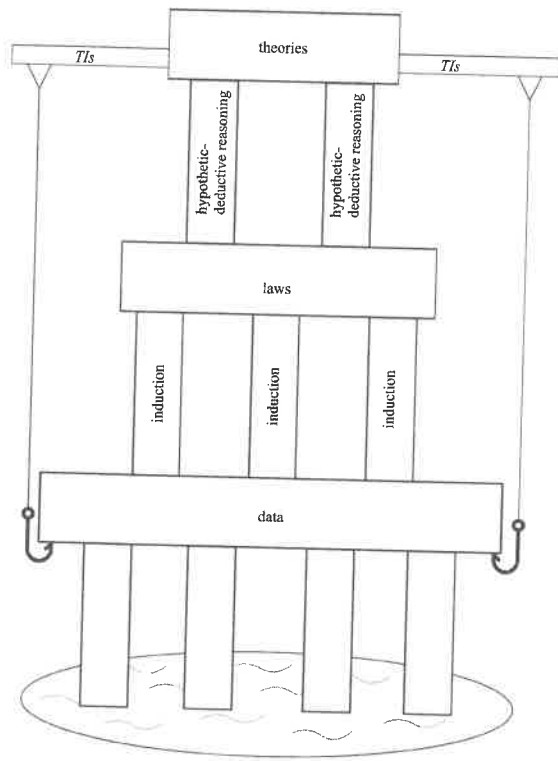


Figure 13 A whimsical representation of scientific “foundations” partially hanging from theoretical “balconies” (i.e. theories of instrumentation, TIs)

usually not noted. However, there have been explicit uses of Quine’s, Kuhn’s, and Lakatos’s work in theology.

Ian Barbour (1923–2013) argues that religions can be understood as analogous to Kuhnian paradigms.²⁵ However, a religion as a whole does not exhibit the logical consistency or agreement among its practitioners that Kuhn took to be hallmarks of scientific paradigms. In addition, the central purpose of science is the pursuit of knowledge, and this is not the case for most religions. A much closer parallel is Hans Küng’s (b.1928) comparison of theological schools with paradigms.²⁶ He suggested that theologians such as Thomas, Calvin, and Luther initiated new paradigms in Christian theology.

Theologians such as Philip Clayton (b.1956), Philip Hefner (b.1932), and Robert John Russell (b.1946) have used Lakatos’s concept of a research program to describe theological schools. The limitations here are that Lakatos’s requirement for new data to confirm a research program is difficult to meet in theology—the best that can usually be asked for are new insights regarding the applicability of already known information—for example, a new interpretation of a biblical text that suddenly shows its relevance to a theological theory.²⁷ In addition, Lakatos’s work only helps to illuminate (second-order) theology, not first-order belief.

The most insightful use of holist epistemology may be that of Ronald Thiemann (1946–2012) in his book *Revelation and Theology*.²⁸ His work is useful for understanding both first- and second-order religious claims. Thiemann argues that the concept of revelation has been distorted by the modern attempt to use Scripture as an epistemological foundation; he sets out to explain it instead in the traditional term of God’s *prevenience*. He explains prevenience as follows:

Christian theology has traditionally been guided by the conviction that faith’s knowledge of God is a gift bestowed through God’s free grace. Our thought and speech about God are not simply the free creations of human imagination but are developed in obedient response to God’s prior initiative. Theologians have commonly referred to this prior act of God as revelation.²⁹

Thiemann first gives an account of holist justification of a theological claim, then uses that method to show the warranted assertability of the doctrine of God’s prevenience. Borrowing from Quine, Thiemann states that holist justification consists in seeking the relation between a disputed belief and the web of

²⁵ Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

²⁶ Hans Küng, “Paradigm Change in Theology,” in Küng and David Tracy, eds., *Moving Toward a New Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 3–33.

²⁷ See Murphy, *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning*, 87.

²⁸ Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).

²⁹ Thiemann, *Revelation*, 2.

interrelated beliefs within which it rests. Quoting Quine, he says: "We convince someone of something by appealing to beliefs he already holds and by combining these to induce further beliefs in him, step by step, until the belief we wanted finally to inculcate in him is inculcated."³⁰

Thiemann notes that belief in God's prevenience is logically tied to both beliefs and practices that are not in dispute among Christians and, further, that these beliefs and practices are so central to Christian identity that to give them up would constitute a drastic change in Christian identity. Praise, supplication, thanksgiving, all become meaningless without the presupposition of God's prior reality and action.

While deeply indebted to Quine, Thiemann's account of theological method is actually more sophisticated in at least four ways than Quine's epistemology. First, he recognizes the intrinsic relations between knowing and doing. It is not merely consistency among beliefs that rationality requires, but also consistency between belief and action (a Wittgensteinian point).

Second, Thiemann recognizes a historical dimension in the justification of beliefs: webs of belief endure and change through time, and part of what consistency requires is congruity with (but not slavish repetition of) past formulations. This is a more sophisticated version of Quine's recognition of the value of conservatism in matters epistemological.

Third, Quine counts the laws of logic as part of the web of belief. This claim needs to be extended to recognize that all sorts of standards of rationality are internal to traditions, as Thiemann recognizes in claiming that part of the theologian's description of the "internal logic of the Christian faith" is recognition and employment of "criteria of judgment internal to the Christian tradition."³¹

Finally, the critical problem with using Quine's model of holist epistemology is that it leaves one open to a radical form of relativism. Since Quine considered knowledge to consist of only logic, science, and everyday beliefs based on experience, it never occurred to him to worry about radically different and competing webs of beliefs. A topic to be covered in this text, though, is the problem of religious pluralism. Christians are well aware of these competitors, and so we need some guidance for adjudicating among them if we are to be able to claim that the Christian web is more rational, and therefore the true one. So while holist epistemology offers valuable resources for the theological task, none of the models we have examined here is entirely adequate.

³⁰ Thiemann, *Revelation*, 75–6; quoting from Quine and Ullian, *The Web of Belief*, 127.

³¹ Thiemann, *Revelation*, 74.

5 Retrospect and prospect

The foregoing section may seem puzzling to some students because these problems of modern philosophy are not their own. Also, the extensive use of philosophy of science in a philosophy of religion text may seem odd. However, I believe we need to know these bits of history in order both to appreciate the difficulties Christians have had throughout the modern period in defending their beliefs, and also to appreciate newer and more sophisticated theories of rationality.

We have seen some value in the works of Quine, Kuhn, and Lakatos for understanding theological reasoning, but none of these theories is entirely appropriate for describing theology. For example, Kuhn's emphasis on authoritative texts may be useful for thinking about Scripture, but neither Quine nor Lakatos have guidance here. In addition, none of these theories provides a model to allow theologians to address the relation between first- and second-order religious language.

Fortunately for us, Alasdair MacIntyre has incorporated the best insights from these holist epistemologists, and from Wittgenstein as well, into a new theory that will turn out to fit a religious tradition like a glove.